Reconnaissance in the Offense

"COMMAND PUSH" vs. "RECON PULL"

by Captain Christopher D. Kolenda

One imperative during the planning process is the commander's description of what he wants each combat multiplier to accomplish; in other words, the commander's intent for fire support, engineer support, etc. Stated properly, this method helps each element employ its systems to their greatest effect in support of the scheme of maneuver. While doctrine states that this method should be used for each combat multiplier, we routinely fail to give this type of guidance to one of our most important assets — reconnaissance.

Commanders employ their combat multipliers in several ways. They use fire support assets to destroy, neutralize, or suppress. They use engineers to turn, fix, block, or disrupt the enemy or to prevent the enemy from doing the same. These methods maximize the effect of these systems on the enemy in support of the scheme of maneuver. Employment methods for reconnaissance, however, all too often remain ill-defined. As a result, our reconnaissance assets often do not deliver the intelligence necessary to either develop or support the scheme of maneuver.

There are two fundamental employment methodologies for reconnaissance: recon-pull and command-push.[1] These techniques are based on the German and Soviet models, respectively, and have given both armies a distinct advantage over those who inappropriately define the role of their reconnaissance assets. We, however, often use a method called recon-push. Recon-push is simply an effort designed to "get the scouts out early" in order to "identify all enemy in zone." It is a quantitative approach to reconnaissance that normally uses a myriad of graphic control measures to ensure the scouts leave no stone unturned in a particular area or zone of operations. Recon-push is the Mission Training Plan approach to reconnaissance — a check-the-block method that lends itself to planning in a reconnaissance vacuum.

Here's how recon-push often works: Once a staff receives the mission, the S2 and/or S3 hastily work out a reconnaissance and surveillance plan, complete with graphic control measures to cover all of the key terrain and templated enemy locations. The scouts are told to "identify all enemy in zone." As the scouts are covering their routes, Named Areas of Interest (NAIs), and checkpoints, the parallel planning process begins. The plan is developed, the order is issued, and detailed rehearsals begin prior to the results of the reconnaissance. Once the intelligence reports begin to come in, the S2 and S3 gather these reports, which may confirm or deny their template, then try to figure out how to overcome the enemy.

This process, typical of most units, seems logical, but it is a recipe for disaster. The initial breakdown occurs at the reconnaissance planning level. The problem stems, first of all, from the inability of the planners to decide or articulate what they want the scouts to accomplish and how this will contribute to the success of the mission. We try to overcome this deficiency by giving the scouts precise graphic control measures to guide their efforts and hope that this will pass for proper definition. We hope our deficiencies in guidance will be overcome if the scouts can identify all enemy in the zone, but this is rarely the case. The problem is generally one of two things:

- We do not know what we want our scouts to accomplish or do not know what they can accomplish.
- We know what we want them to accomplish, but what we want and what we are asking the scouts to do are two different things.

An analogy is useful in illustrating this problem. Traversing the battlefield is like moving through a forest. It is a medium of resistance. The forest contains many unknowns that are hidden beneath the canopy, several of which may prevent us from reaching the other side. There are several ways of getting through, some of which are more hazardous than the others. Since we cannot adequately determine the best way to negotiate the forest from a map or aerial photograph, we must send a recon party to fill in our informational gaps so we can select the best route for the main body. What we should really want is a better picture of the forest and an appreciation of how we can get through it with the least amount of resistance along the way. Yet, what we often ask for is a detailed description of the trees rather than a better appraisal of the forest itself.

The recon-push approach to this problem would be to give the recon party a comprehensive list of checkpoints and routes and ask them to report in detail on all of these — and in the recon-push mentality we get just what we ask for. The recon party will report oak trees at one checkpoint, birch at another, and pine at a third. Road A may have some fallen trees in the path, road B a boulder, road C washes out in deep ravine but has a difficult bypass 50 meters to the south, and road D, which is not in the plan but a route the party happened to stumble onto, is somewhat treacherous but does move through the forest unimpeded.

What we know now is that part of the forest has oak trees, part of it has birch trees and another part has pine trees. We also know that each of the routes we chose has an obstruction that we must overcome in order to use the route, and that a route we did not consider will get us through the forest unimpeded. The common sense solution would be to choose route D, but this is not possible in recon-push.

The problem is that while the scouts were out gathering information, the planners had already chosen and rehearsed a plan and a scheme of maneuver to negotiate the forest. This is the

second breakdown. The results of the reconnaissance really do not matter as far as the plan is concerned at the macro-level. The information is used to determine what dangers the main body must overcome in order to execute the plan successfully. Some micro-level adjustments are made, but the overall plan remains intact. The obvious result is a lot of needlessly wasted time and energy along the way.

If we replace the simplistic forest scenario with the complex battlefield scenario, the problems associated with this mentality become very serious. By selecting recon-push, we fail to maximize the benefits of our reconnaissance. Instead of gaining an appreciation for the battlefield, we get a myriad of details that may not help us better comprehend the meaning of the entire picture. But the paradox of recon-push is that we really do not want this portrayal anyway, because we have already decided what to do. All we want to know is what we can expect to encounter along the way so we can line up our assets to deal with these problems. The foundation of the scheme of maneuver is not good planning; it is hope sprinkled with a little bit of luck. Ideally, we want to pit our strength against the enemy's weakness and force him to fight in a direction or manner for which he is unprepared. If we are lucky in using recon-push, our main effort will strike at a weakness in the enemy's defense. If we are not, we will pit strength versus strength with a dicey outcome. The recon-push technique virtually assures us of a strength-on-strength fight, because we have not worked intelligently enough to avoid it.

The recon-push mentality derives from our own inability to understand how to use our reconnaissance assets, and our failure to define coherently what we want our scouts to accomplish. The result? We plan in a reconnaissance vacuum. Instead of adopting a plan based on information and on an appraisal by the only element that knows the texture of the battlefield, we select a plan based on guesswork and the hope that we can overcome whatever gets in our way. The destructive impact of this has been demonstrated at the combat maneuver training centers and in simulation exercises where the OPFOR repeatedly runs rampant over BLUEFOR units.

A classic example of a strength-on-strength frontal assault that resulted from our propensity to plan in a reconnaissance vacuum was realized in a recent simulation exercise conducted at Fort Hood. An armor-heavy brigade was given the mission to conduct a hasty attack against a defending enemy. The enemy was roughly battalion-size, and had set up a complex obstacle belt to support their defense. The brigade had developed a plan to create three breach lanes through the obstacle belt and then conduct a frontal attack against the enemy battalion. A reconnaissance unit was OPCON to the brigade to create the breach lanes.

During the zone reconnaissance, the scouts reported that the obstacle belt was approximately 30 kilometers wide and 10 kilometers deep. They had also identified a three-kilometer-wide gap in the obstacle belt along the western boundary. The scouts reconned the gap, and reported that the gap was clear. A battalion could pass through it in roughly 15 minutes. Furthermore, there was no enemy unit overwatching the gap. The brigade could easily use this route to attack the enemy in the flank and rear and avoid plunging headlong into the enemy's main defense. Instead of using this gap to bypass the obstacle belt and quickly defeat the enemy, the brigade insisted on adhering to the original plan. Three to four hours later the brigade finally pushed through the obstacle belt, attacked into the enemy's strength, and suffered considerable attrition.

This is an example of the paralysis we create through the improper use of reconnaissance in the offense. First of all, the brigade developed the plan in an intelligence vacuum, despite having enough time to send the recon unit forward to gain information. Second, the reconnaissance unit had identified a gap in the enemy's defense early in the mission, but the higher unit failed to adapt their scheme of maneuver to the enemy situation. The result was needless attrition and lost momentum, instead of a quick, decisive victory through an open flank.

The concept of surfaces and gaps that I alluded to earlier is a fundamental building block of warfare at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. Surfaces are areas where the enemy is strong; gaps are where he is weak. Since the enemy cannot be strong everywhere, he must be weak (or weaker) somewhere. Our job is to discover or create an enemy vulnerablility and exploit this weakness to our advantage. What we are interested in is not a fair fight, in which we pit our strength against his, but an unfair fight, in which we employ our strength against his weakness. When we attack an enemy weakness with overwhelming strength, the result is a quick, decisive victory. Yet, in order to do this we must know exactly where these surfaces and gaps are. Reconnaissance, when used in its proper role, is the most important factor in gaining this portrayal of the battlefield. The identification of the enemy's strengths and weaknesses must be the guiding principle behind our reconnaissance effort. This is more than just identifying all enemy in zone. It is a textured picture of the battlefield that gives us an appreciation of where the enemy is most vulnerable and how best to exploit this weakness. In this way it becomes the cornerstone of our tactical plan. Recon-pull and command-push reconnaissance are two methods that will enable us to gain these results.

Recon-pull reconnaissance is derived from what the Germans call *Auftragstaktik*. Literally translated, it means mission tactics. The concept behind *Auftragstaktik* is directive control in which the subordinates are given a specific mission, but are allowed great latitude in deciding how to accomplish it. The binding principle behind *Auftragstaktik* is the commander's intent — what the commander wants to accomplish by conducting a certain mission. The commander's intent, as William S. Lind puts it, is the glue that holds the operation together.[1] This concept leaves the initiative with subordinates so they can create and exploit opportunities as they present themselves on the battlefield. Their only constraint is that their actions must support the commander's intent.

In a classic employment of recon-pull, the commander would use reconnaissance or forward elements to move along different routes or axes toward the enemy. The forward elements (scouts, cavalry troop, advanced guard company) are the "reconnaissance screen." Their mission is to identify the surfaces and gaps in the enemy's defense. Once this gap is found, the commander will exploit the opportunity by sending the main body to attack this vulnerability and penetrate into the gap. The main body can then commit forces to widen the gap and envelop the enemy from the rear. The forward ele-

ment continues to move, seeking paths of least resistance, and pulling the main body deep into the enemy's rear. The key is to avoid the places where the enemy is strong and find a lightly or undefended gap that leads to the enemy's rear. In doing so, the commander pits his strength against the enemy's weakness with considerable advantage, rather than rushing headlong into the teeth of the enemy's defense.[2]

In a nutshell, the reconnaissance element pulls the main body toward the enemy weakness. The main body crushes the enemy at this point, pours through the gap, then continues deeper to destroy the enemy's fire support assets, or attacks the enemy's assailable flank or rear. In either case, the surface the enemy has built becomes insignificant. This part of the enemy's defense is either bypassed, isolated, or forced to fight in a manner or direction that it is not accustomed to or prepared for. The result is an unfair fight in which we have a decided advantage.

Recon-pull tactics could have been used very effectively in the above simulation exercise. The reconnaissance unit could have "pulled" the brigade through the gap in the enemy's defense, thereby rendering the obstacle belt insignificant and forcing the enemy to fight in an unexpected direction. The logical outcome would have been a quick, decisive victory in a matter of minutes rather than a slow, indecisive, and attrition-laden frontal assault against the enemy's strength. The former approach cuts through the enemy's defense like a sharp knife, the latter is akin to performing surgery with a blunt instrument — dull and painful, lots of tissue damage, and with a much lower chance of success.

The use of recon-pull, however, is not a panacea. Recon-pull relies on directive control, mission orders, and "trust tactics." It emphasizes the ability to read a situation rapidly, identify a weakness, and exploit it. As a result, it requires extensive training in reconnaissance, enemy doctrine, and rapid, agile battle drills to be effective. Since it stresses the primacy of opportunity, recon-pull requires a great deal of trust between senior and subordinate commanders, and a clear commander's intent and main effort to unify the action. Given the nature of the training required to attain the level of battlefield insight necessary to recognize and exploit opportunity, and the level of trust a senior must place in the decisions of his subordinate commander, we cannot just wake up one day and decide to use recon-pull tactics. We must create a culture within our units that trains, reinforces, and rewards the confident, independent, yet properly-focused atmosphere and unity required to make this a reality. This cannot be accomplished overnight. It requires a deliberate commitment on the part of the senior commander to train and empower his subordinate leaders to make the rapid, accurate decisions necessary to recognize and exploit opportunity.

"How does the OPFOR do it? First of all, their reconnaissance units and intelligence officers are trained to look for enemy strengths and weaknesses. They do not send their scouts out merely to check a block on the MTP...."

Skeptics will argue that these decisions are too important to be left in the hands of subordinate leaders. I would argue that they are too important not to be. The side with the fastest decision-cycle wins. Sound decisions made at the lower level are implemented faster than the same decisions made at a higher level because of the nature of communication. The question thus becomes not whether our subordinates should make these choices, but what have we done to train them to make these decisions. Training our subordinates *how* to think rather than *what* to think, and evaluating the decision-making process as well as the decision itself, are important steps in this direction.

Recon-pull is most appropriate in a fluid situation where the enemy situation is unclear, or is rapidly changing. However, if we are given sufficient planning time against a relatively static enemy force, a different approach might be more suitable, "command push." This type of reconnaissance is built on the Soviet model which uses detailed instead of directive control. This is also the model used by the OPFOR at the Combat Maneuver Training Centers. The purpose of command-push reconnaissance, like recon-pull, is to identify enemy strengths and weaknesses, or surfaces and gaps, and report them to the commander, who then designs a detailed plan to mass his strength against the enemy weakness. This approach differs from recon-push because the plan is selected on the basis of the reconnaissance results, not regardless of them. Often, the commander designs several different courses of action and develops them in as much detail as possible prior to the results of the reconnaissance. Once the recon units have painted the picture of the battlefield, the commander selects a plan based on this information and refines it in sufficient detail to give his unit the greatest possibility of success. This precise plan emphasizes unity of effort at the expense of opportunity, since the enemy situation is known in enough detail to allow for rigorous, centralized planning.

This method of reconnaissance is also very effective. Fifty-five battles were studied at the National Training Center to determine the impact of reconnaissance in the offense. In 50 of these battles, the OPFOR reconnaissance was successful in identifying 85-90 percent of the BLUEFOR's vehicle positions. The OPFOR won 45 of these battles.

How does the OPFOR do it? First of all, their reconnaissance units and intelligence officers are trained to look for enemy strengths and weaknesses. They do not send their scouts out merely to check a block on the MTP. They aggressively locate enemy positions, identify potential strengths and weaknesses, then report those detailed findings. The commander then selects his plan and scheme of maneuver based on the enemy template developed by the division recon and confirmed by the regimental recon. The OPFOR accepts risk in planning time, but overcomes this through detailed rehearsals on formations, movement techniques, and actions on contact drills. This method allows the OPFOR commander to mass his strength against the BLUEFOR's weakness. The result is a 90 percent success rate.

Both methods of reconnaissance are extremely effective and can be used by themselves, or in combination when the battlefield transitions from a static to a fluid nature. Recon-pull emphasizes opportunity over detailed control, and relies upon the commander's intent and designation of the main effort in order to achieve unity. Command-push, on the other hand, stresses early determination of enemy strengths and weaknesses, and a detailed plan to overwhelm the weakness over the exploitation of opportunity.

The key to a successful reconnaissance effort is the identification of enemy surfaces and gaps, for this allows the commander to mass his strength against an enemy weakness. The commander's intent for reconnaissance, therefore, must have the identification of enemy strengths and weaknesses as its foundation, and our reconnaissance collectors and assessors must be trained to recognize these. The efforts of the collectors (the scouts) and the assessors (the S2) must be mutually supporting and complement one another.

One of the great travesties of our system is the perpetuation of the "tell me what you see and not what you think" syndrome. This mentality assumes a minimum level of competence on the part of the scouts and a maximum level of omniscience on the part of the S2. Indeed, it often seems as though we treat the S2 as the guardian of some bastion of doctrinal and interpretive truth that no one is allowed to enter. This penchant robs us of the valuable analysis that the only element with eyes on the battlefield can offer. It also places the S2 in an unfair position.

I had the opportunity to witness an unfortunate manifestation of this syndrome while observing a unit at a combat training center. This particular unit was planning an offensive mission and had sent the scouts on a zone recon up to a designated phase-line. The unit had assumed incorrectly that it would encounter a moving enemy force the next morning and had based their plan accordingly. Meanwhile, during the zone reconnaissance, the scouts encountered an obstacle belt that was overwatched by two enemy vehicles with a considerable amount of artillery at their disposal. The scouts did their duty and reported exactly what they saw and nothing else. The next morning, air scouts preceded the ground scouts as the forward element, and the unit began moving toward its objective. One air scout had gotten himself into an excellent position and observed roughly five vehicles moving into defensive positions. He also reported exactly what he saw — five vehicles moving. The report was incomplete because the scout failed to report that the vehicles were moving into a defensive position, but even if he had, the results would not have been much different. The command group — S2, S3, and commander included — were firmly wedded to the idea that they were facing a moving enemy force, and pushed the unit to move quickly to gain a piece of defensible terrain. The reality was much different. The enemy was stationary and had occupied a hasty defensive position. The unfortunate unit was quickly decimated before realizing what it was up against.

The S2 was the scapegoat for the defeat because he failed to interpret the enemy situation properly, but there was plenty of blame for everyone. The obstacle belt and the overwatching observation post should have been a tell-tale sign that the scouts had entered the enemy security zone. This should have been the first indication that the enemy was in a defensive rather than an offensive posture. The five moving enemy vehicles were the enemy's reserve that had taken up position to reinforce the defense. Nevertheless, this entire situation could have been avoided if the scouts were trained and trusted to analyze what they had seen. We need to arrive at some level within the reconnaissance effort where analysis from the forward scouts and S2 is synergized. The appropriate level for this is the scout platoon leader. He should be trained to do the S2's job just as well as the S2 himself. In this way, there is an analytical dialog between the front and the command post based on knowledge and trust. The result will be a more precise and robust depiction of the battlefield.

Thus far I have discussed some of the fundamental problems associated with our reconnaissance efforts. The first of which is the inability to define and/or articulate what we really want the scouts to accomplish, resulting in a misalignment between expectations and instructions, coupled with tactical planning in an information vacuum. The second is the lack of training and/or trust we place in our scouts, which results in an incomplete or erroneous depiction of the battlefield. I have offered solutions to both of these problems. I have also laid out the theoretical conceptions behind recon-pull and command-push reconnaissance and examples in which they were either used or could have been used to improve the success of a tactical plan. I will now offer a technique which I have found to be effective against a static enemy defense: layered reconnaissance.

The initial reconnaissance element moves out with the task of identifying enemy strengths and weaknesses through a detailed reconnaissance of enemy positions. This may be accomplished through the use of ground, air and electronic reconnaissance. Their purpose is to develop the enemy template to enable the commander to decide which axis he will use and determine the focal point of his attack. In the meantime, the units can conduct rehearsals on movement formations and techniques, actions on contact, and breach drills. Once the template is developed, a second reconnaissance element (platoon-sized) confirm this template. That element should then be in a position to bring artillery fires at the point of attack, and use smoke to isolate that enemy element from the rest of the defense. Once the template is confirmed, the scheme of maneuver is locked in.

The last reconnaissance element is the advanced guard (company-sized). Its purpose is to establish the conditions for the attack of the main body by creating a gap in the enemy's defense at the weak point and pulling the main body through the gap in the defense. The main body can then continue to a deeper objective, or attack the defending enemy from the flank or rear and widen the gap for the follow-on force.

This technique may sound suspiciously similar to the tactics employed by the OPFOR at the National Training Center, but it is consistent with our doctrine. The only difference is in the use of reconnaissance to accomplish one specific task — identify the surfaces and gaps in the enemy's defense — which enables us to pit our strength against an enemy weakness. Another difference may be the commitment of an infantry platoon as a second layer in the reconnaissance effort. While this detracts from the raw combat power of the main body, it becomes an important combat multiplier in confirming the enemy's weak point and bringing other combat multipliers to bear at the focal point of the attack. If we can achieve these reconnaissance results, our success rate will increase several-fold, and enable us to gain a greater local superiority at the decisive point.

Reconnaissance is a critical, but often misused, combat multiplier. Recon-pull and command-push reconnaissance are two methods that support their parent form of tactics, and have been used effectively by both German and Soviet-style forces. The most critical task in the reconnaissance effort is the identifi-

cation of enemy strengths and weaknesses, and using these reconnaissance results to match our strength against the enemy weakness. If done effectively, the result is an unfair fight to our advantage where we can achieve a quick, decisive victory.

Notes

[1]For a detailed discussion of these methodologies from a theoretical standpoint see Robert Leonhard, *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuver-Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle*, Novato, Calif: Presidio Press, 1991, pp. 113-118. Leonhard's discussion centers on *Auftragstaktik* and *Befehlstaktik* as command and control methodologies, but he also relates them to how reconnaissance is used within these conceptual frameworks. See also William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1985, pp. 18-19.

[2]See also Leonhard, pp. 113-114, and Lind, pp. 18-19.

Captain Christopher Kolenda is a 1987 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy. His previous assignments include tank platoon leader (M Co) and scout platoon leader and XO (L Trp) 3/11 ACR; U.S. Boeselager Team, Sep 89-Jun 90; and motor officer, 1-7 Cav and commander, A Trp, 1-7 Cav, 1st Cavalry Division. A graduate of Armor Officer Basic Course, Armor Officer Advanced Course (Distinguished Honor Graduate), BMOC, CAS[3], and Air Assault, Airborne, and Ranger Courses, he is currently a graduate student, Modern European History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, enroute to Department of History, USMA.